

# MOROCCAN MUSIC & MOVEMENT



[www.Tahya.com](http://www.Tahya.com)

[www.HathorSystrum.com](http://www.HathorSystrum.com)

# Guedra: Benediction & Betrothal

Written by Morocco (Carolina Varga Dinicu) | <https://www.casbahdance.org/category/articles/>



Trance ritual of the “Blue People” of the Sahara Desert, (from Mauritania through Morocco all the way to Egypt).

Hands trace mystical symbols, spreading love & peace, thanking Earth, Water, Wind & Fire, blessing all present in spirit & fact. It is combined with the Betrothal Dance of Tissint.

You can read more about both dances in “Dance As Community Identity” (included below).



# AWASH

<https://www.marrakech-riad.co.uk/2017/12/moroccan-dance-and-folklore-ahwash/>

Ahwash is a folkloric style of music and associated dance from southern Morocco, the areas around the High Atlas mountains of Morocco.

Women in colourful dress stand motionless around a group of men who are in turn sitting around a fire. The men each have “bendir’s (simple wood and skin frame drums). A piercing cry breaks the silence, and the performance begins. The men begin to beat their drums and the woman sway slowly from side to side. The pace builds throughout the performance.

Ahwash is generally performed by two large groups of people who alternate their performances of song, dance, poetry, and drumming on frame drums.

Ahwash may have originated in Telouet, a small High Atlas village, though historians have struggled to conclusively determine its origins because of the lack of written history.

Ahwash is woven into early Amazigh History, and is likely to predate Islam.







# Dance As Community Identity in Selected Berber Nations of Morocco

Written by Morocco (Carolina Varga Dinicu)

## 1. FROM the ETHEREAL and SUBLIME to the EROTIC and SEXUAL

(For the Congress on Research in Dance & the Society of Dance History Scholars Conference/ Lincoln Center, New York City, June 1993)

### I. GUEDRA: Spreading Soul's Love & Peace to the Beat of the Heart

In a nomadic society, what can be carried by one person is limited, so every item must be essential and multi-purpose. In classical Arabic, the word “guedra” means cauldron/cooking pot. That pot was covered with an animal skin to make a drum, also called “guedra”, to play the heart-beat rhythm (life’s basic rhythm) – also called “guedra”, for the female performer – also called a “guedra”, of the ritual, which is also called “Guedra” *only* as long as it is being done on the knees: when the “guedra” stands up (or starts the ritual standing up), it is called T’bal. In the 34 years I’ve been researching, doing and teaching Guedra, nobody has been able to explain the reason for the difference – not even my teacher, B’shara. I have come to my own conclusions, based on language, which I won’t go into here.

Guedra belongs to the Blue People of the Tuareg Berbers, from that part of the Sahara Desert which ranges from Mauritania into Morocco and Algeria (Spanish and French Sahara) and all the way to Egypt. When, due to current long-term drought or economic conditions, Blue People choose to live in a town in Morocco, it is usually Goulmime or TanTan.

Why are they called “Blue People”? Because they love to use indigo stones to color pieces of fabric by pounding the stones into powder and the powder into the fabric – as versus dying by hot-water dip. The bluer and shinier the resulting fabric, the more beautiful the item of clothing and the higher the status of the wearer, since more was spent to get the richer color. In the course of wearing fabric so treated, little by little, some of the blue powder gets on the skin of the wearer. In a desert, one can’t take daily showers, so the wearer’s skin actually takes on a bluish tinge, which is considered beautiful and desirable. The good news is that this powder also protects the skin from drying out from the terrible desert sun and heat by locking in natural moisture and acting as an extremely effective sunscreen. All “Blue People” are Tuareg, but not all Tuaregs are “Blue”.

The Blue People have a matriarchal society: unusual enough in terms of “Western” cultures, almost unbelievable in context of what is assumed to be “Islamic”. Women keep all the household keys, show off their “strength” by impromptu wrestling matches, go unveiled – while the men modestly cover their noses and mouths with the end of their *tagelmousses* (several meters of gauze, wrapped around the head in a turban), and have equal – if not

greater rights to choose/take as many lovers as they wish before marriage: it only increases their value, skill and desirability (1,2,3).

Why do Blue men, feared to this day for their ferocity and skill as warriors and respected as businessmen, “veil” and defer to their own women? Because of their belief that the world has a great number of evil “spirits” eager to invade the body via any opening – especially the mouth and nostrils, so they must cover/protect the entranceways, but since women know the secret of life: only they can conceive and givebirth, they have natural protection against these evil spirits.

For the Blue People, Guedra isn't merely a dance, it is a ritual in which anybody and everybody can participate, although the central figure/s is/are the female Guedra/s (sometimes two women do it together, or a man and woman or woman and child of either sex). Unlike the Zar (Sudan/ Libya/ Egypt) or the Hadra (Morocco), the Guedra's aim is NOT to exorcise a person or place of evil spirits, but to envelop all present with “good energy”, peace and spiritual love – as versus carnal, transmitted from the depths of the guedra's soul via her fingers and hands.

The entire accompaniment consists of the drum (guedra), which can be played by anyone, of any sex or age, with the skill and desire to do so, rhythmical clapping and chanting by any and all others present. Nowadays, a gourd instrument that is slapped and shaken is sometimes added. Chants are in *Tamahaq*(their language) or Maghrebi (Moroccan Arabic) and can be about anything from Islamic exhortations calling on the name of Allah: El hamdu l'Illa , Allah, Allah (all praise to Allah, oh Allah, oh Allah); Wahad, Wahad, Wahad (God is one); to praise or comments about King Hassan II or expressions of thanks for good fortune or a wish granted. Most often, they call upon God and goodness, to be shared with all humanity.

Clothing often has a tremendous effect on the movements and styles of dances and rituals, especially in ethnic forms, where tradition leaves very little leeway for individual choice or expression. Those garments, their styles and reasons for being that way, usually pre-dated the dances and rituals done while wearing them. Not so theater dance, where costumes are (hopefully) designed to facilitate and accentuate the choreography. (Exceptions do exist.)

Usually over a caftan (long, loose robe), sometimes not, Blue women wear a length of fabric, five to six meters long by about two meters wide. Wound around the body, folded over a bit in the front, both front and back portions are caught at the collar bones after each turn by two elaborate fibulae: the world's first “safety pins”. Long chains are suspended from the fibulae to hold them in place and as ornamentation. A rope or belt is tied around the waist and fabric pulled up for a blouson effect and so the skirt just reaches the top of the foot. The last two meters are left unwound, to be pulled up and draped over the wearer's headdress, should circumstances or the desert heat require it. This train-cum-veil plays a very important part in desert survival – and the Guedra.

The Blue woman's unique headdress is also a result of adaptation to desert conditions – and germane to the overall effect of the Guedra. Anywhere from two to six inches high (or more), the front is made of leather, canvas, felt or woven horsehair decorated with cowry shells, silver coins, turquoise, coral and the occasional mother-of-pearl button or Coca – Cola bottle top. From this front, a circlet of wire sits on the crown of the head and the wearer's hair, interwoven with horsehair and braided over and down, fastens it firmly to the head. Cowrie shells, silver, turquoise and coral beads are also woven into the multiple braids. From the back of the circlet, a “handle” rises to the same height as the front piece, up and over the center of the head, approaching but not touching the front “crown”. Horsehair or wool is woven around it.

Such a time-consuming and elaborate hairdo is usually redone every one to one and a half months. The headdress supports the aforementioned two-meter fabric end, keeping it off the the wearer's head and leaving an air space that maintains her normal body temperature of 98.6F, thereby keeping her cooler in the heat of the day and warmer in the cold desert night.

Guedra is a nighttime ritual, around a fire under the light of the moon or inside one of the larger tents. When done for real, as versus for an audience, it's most often in a circle. The drum throbs with the heartbeat rhythm: da da dum da da, da da dum da da and the clapping starts. Shrill zagareet (ululations) ring out, the chanting swells. Inspiration calls, a woman from the circle answers: for now, she is the guedra. Pulling the tail of her robe over her headdress, so it covers her head, face and chest, she puts on the “magic” neck- lace. It's up to her as to whether she starts standing up or on her knees.

The “veil” covering the guedra's head, shoulders and chest signifies darkness, the unknown, lack of knowledge. Her hands and fingers are moving under the covering, flicking at it, trying to escape into the light. When she feels the time is right, the guedra's hands emerge from the veil's sides. With hand-to-head gestures, she salutes the four corners: North, South, East and West, followed by obeisances to the four elements: Fire (the sun), Earth, Wind and Water. She touches her abdomen, heart and head, then quickly flicks her fingers towards all others present, in life or spirit, sending blessings to them from the depths of her soul's energy.

Why does she touch her abdomen? In the East, the heart is known to be fickle and unreliable. When somebody wishes to convey true depth of affections or emotions, the way of expressing it is to say: “You are in my liver.”, not “You are in my heart.”, as we do in the West. By indicating any approximate spot on her abdomen – not necessarily the anatomically correct location – the *guedra* underscores the depth and sincerity of her blessing. In the West, we used to believe the third (ring) finger of the left hand lead to the heart, ergo the custom of wearing engagement and/or wedding rings there. Blue people believe their second fingers to be direct lines to the soul, with power to transmit blessings or curses, so the *guedra* directs most of her mini-bolts of energy through them, gently holding them a bit lower than the others. This energy can be specifically focused on an individual, present or not, to a group or the entire world.

Once again, when the *guedra* feels the time is “right”, she takes off the magic necklace, uncovers her face, drapes the fabric on top of her headdress or out-of-the-way, replaces the necklace and focuses her gaze and blessings more strongly and specifically. The drumming, clapping and chanting increase in tempo and intensity at each phase, as does the *guedra*’s breathing. If her hands flick to the front, the *guedra* sends blessings for the future, to the side – the present, in back – the past. Overhead – to the Sun, down – to the Earth, from side to side – to the waters and winds. Time is a circle. In the *Guedra*, the vast majority of movement flows from the fingers and hands, with some arm movement from the elbows down.

The ribcage is lifted and lowered/relaxed, as in some African dances, when extra emphasis is called for. The head can be gently turned from side-to- side, causing the braids to sway. As the *guedra* comes to a crescendo, accent in the chest movements transfers from lift to lowering and the head swings more strongly from side -to- side with chin lifts, causing her braids to “fly”. When done “for real”, the *Guedra* goes on for quite awhile, gradually increasing in tempo and intensity, but still keeping the heartbeat rhythm. Likewise, the *guedra*’s breathing also increases in depth and intensity, until she collapses in a trance.

When a man joins in, it is as an accompaniment, to induce a woman of his choice to accept the magic necklace from him and bless him – and the others with her soul’s energy via the *Guedra*. After she accepts and takes the necklace, he unfolds the shoulder drapings of his *dra*, holding it out in his fingers to its full width, dipping and swaying from side to side, until she is ready to focus her energy and go on with the ritual alone. In the group, the men concentrate on driving and maintaining the clapping and chanting that encourage the *guedra* and deepen her trance.

Blue people consider *Guedra* their direct contact with the elements, spirits and universe, the deepest expression of their souls and protection against a hostile environment and evil spirits. So seriously is it taken by Moroccans in general, that his majesty, King Hassan II, had his own personal *Guedra*, B’shara of Guelmim, who I was fortunate enough to have known as a friend and teacher from 1963 to her death from cancer in 1992.

## **II. Betrothal Dance of Tissint: Pursuit, Persistence and Victory**

*Tissint* is located in the south of the Anti Atlas, about 40km from the Algerian border. The women’s festival clothing is marvelous: a long, flowing black overrobe with multicolored zigzag embroidery at the shoulders and across the chest, tied at the waist with a multi- colored woven wool belt ending in tassels hanging almost to the feet. The black head veil is held in place by embroidered bands hung with silver coins and almost unbelievably elaborate large silver jewelry, chains and ornaments. Very large silver hoop “earrings” hang from both sides of this headwear. Many necklaces of graduated size, made of silver coins, some interspersed with large amber, turquoise and coral beads, adorn the chest. Large silver bracelets circle each wrist.

The men wear flowing blue *ghandouras* over white *kaftans*, with black cloth wound into turbans on their heads: similar to, but not as big or elaborate as the *dras* and *tagelmousses* of the Blue Men. Each has a dagger at his left hip, its sheath attached to a braided cord hung over the right shoulder and across the chest. Some *ghandouras* have elaborate, thin-cord embroidered ornamentation on the chest and pocket.

The *bendir* players [\(4\)](#), clappers and chanters are from the community and not professionals. They sit in a circle, in the center of the dance space, not only musicians and accompanists for the festivities, but chaperones making sure the limits of propriety are adhered to.

After the group of mostly young men and women dance awhile to a relatively lively tempo, one of the young women detaches herself from the group. One of the young men stands, holding overhead the corded belt from which his silver dagger dangles: he offers his protection. It is an official, public proposal of marriage. (Usually known about and agreed to in advance, but not always: surprises do occur.) He dances after her, whirling and swooping, the dagger, held high, swaying on its cord. She constantly flutters her shoulders like a frightened bird, hands palms up, elbows gracefully bent, while she flees from him for awhile, then approaches, coyly whirling and escaping at the last moment.

When done “for real”, this “mating dance” goes on for quite awhile, to show that she is “hard to get” and he is undaunted in the face of resistance, because he truly wants her for his wife. Once she lingers in front of him long enough for him to slip the corded belt over her head, they are officially betrothed. He kneels before her beauty and acceptance of his proposal. She, shoulders still fluttering, makes a last circuit of the group, showing off his dagger around her neck: she is under his protection.

This danced ceremony, involving the whole community, predates Islam. It continues in spite of efforts by conservative religious elements and bureaucrats to convince the people of Tissint to abandon it as heretical and against the Hadith, and use only religious contracts, ceremonies and bureaucratic paperwork to legalize their unions. Fortunately, its continued inclusion in the Marrakesh Folk Festival by the Ministry of Culture keeps the anti – dance wolves in Tissint at bay for the present.

### **III. Ahouache of Imin Tanout: Dancing the Night Away**

The musicians sit in a circle around the fire, heating their bendirs and getting ready for a long haul. The night air is still, then the bendirs and small drums start to thrum and reverberate. The “Rais”, or leader, prepares to direct the group’s formations and sequences, somewhat like a square dance caller, but in a more general, laissez – faire manner: closer to a traffic cop on a crowded urban street. He is there mostly to make sure the proprieties and distances are kept, for this is a dance in which only the unmarried can take part: it is their socially acceptable way to “check each other out” – all night.

Everyone wears his or her best: the men in long, loose, hooded white ‘dras over close – fitting white thobes, white headwraps and with the requisite daggers on thick cord belts draped over their right shoulders, resting at their left hips, yellow babouches on their feet; the girls, some very young, in individual, multicolored kaftans and d’finas, over which all have tied white “skirts” made from lengths of wide fabric, folded over cords to form two tiers and gathered (no sewing needed, just fold to store away!) under their belts, fringed, patterned headscarves (red a predominant color) held in place by two-rowed bands of silver coins attached with chains and hooks, the babouches on their feet and, most important for this dance, around their necks, each young girl has a many-tiered, large chestpiece of silver coins and semi – precious stones.

Standing in a line shoulder -to- shoulder, the (mostly) young men sing their paeans to the young women’s beauty. They clap rhythmically, as the young women, in a separate line of their own, sing out their answer. This call -and- response alternates for a bit. At a signal from the rais, keeping their line, the young girls run forward, stop, and, holding hands, both feet flat on the ground, bob up and down to make their heavy chestpieces jingle loudly. Arms pumping with the beat, the sound of the coins becomes part of the music. They divide into two lines, with the rais at the center, and run towards each other, form a circle, drop to one knee, join hands and, swinging their arms back and forth to the beat, vibrate their chestpieces again. Jumping up, they form two lines again and drop to one knee, facing the young men, to repeat the arm swinging and coin vibrating. This continues for a while, since their main purpose is to show off for their possible future husbands: not only their beauty, but even more important in the harsh realities of the Berber world, their physical strength and endurance. When it is the men’s turn, they sing, clap rhythmically, lean from side -to- side in unison, then run forward, stop and stamp their feet furiously to the beat. Which group does what and when is up to the rais, who usually alternates the men and women every fifteen minutes or so. The dancing is over at dawn.

These Ahouaches are held at every appropriate holiday or public event, since this is the only way young people can get to know who is eligible outside of their immediate families: teen hangouts, school dances and Western – style dating are totally unknown and unacceptable within this mainly traditional, agrarian culture. Imin Tanout is located halfway between Marrakesh and Agadir. Ahouache is danced all over southern Morocco, in the High Atlas, Dades Valley, Ouarzazate and Kelaa M’Gouna as well as Imin Tanout. Often, the distinctive dress of the women of each Berber tribe is the only way to determine which is dancing.

### **IV. Kelaa of M’Gouna: Unbelievable Precision Amid the Scent of Roses**

El Kelaa M’Gouna (sometimes called Kelaa des M’Gouna) is on the Kasbah Road, in the Dades Valley, 90 kms north of Ouarzazate and south of Tinghir. A place blessed with abundant water and fertile soil, it has a rich agricultural tradition. World famous for its vast, fragrant rose gardens, it holds an annual Rose Festival in May. It is believed that these rose fields are of Yemenite origin, but the houses of the Ait Atta, strangely resembling those of Nepal, and their high cheekbones and slanted eyes point to more far eastern or Oriental origins.

Their dance is a type of Ahidous, very similar to the Ahouache, but a bit more “dignified”, with the rais in total control of the movement shapes and sequences. As with the Ahouache of Imin Tanout, only unmarried women can participate in the dance and it is the village’s socially acceptable venue for its young people to get close enough to look each other over and make (hopefully) lifetime matches.



The men wear the same sort of white thobes and hooded 'dras as those of Imin Tanout, with one significant exception: in place of the daggers hanging on thick cords at the left hip, they have leather bags. Over their kaftans and d'finas, the women's dress is something else entirely: a floor – length piece of black cloth passes under the right arm, over the chest and back, caught at the left shoulder by a fibula, while a second piece of white cloth passes under the left arm, over the chest and back, caught at the right shoulder by the second fibula, a chain hanging from the bottom of both fibulae. Several red cords are tied around the waist, the ends left to dangle in bunches at the front. They wear decorated leather shoes with front and back pieces that come up over the ankle. Necklaces of large amber beads, interspersed with silver, adorn each neck, as do second necklaces of elaborately twisted strands of colored beads. They all have the same hairdo: very short, fluffy bangs and one big braid, doubled over, at each ear. Their high headpieces, held in place with tiny gold chains circling their foreheads under the bangs, are covered in strands of colored wool with metal sequins dangling down all over. Hanging from the back of the headpiece is a black kerchief, fringed with short strands of the same colored wool.

All the men play bendirs while they dance, including the rais, who's there to direct the movements and make sure the men and women don't get too close.

The women cross their arms in front and take a hand of the dancer on each side. The men, shoulder-to-shoulder, play their bendirs. They rush towards each other, almost meet, then return, moving backwards. Forward again, only to separate at the last moment into four sides of a square. The two male sides rush towards each other, swivel by one another in the middle and change sides. The women do likewise. Both figures are repeated several times, then both sides circle one another, going in opposite directions: men on the inside, women always on the outside – it wouldn't be right for them to be surrounded by men.

Forming a cross, they move with strides of varying length in order to keep its shape as they circle counter – clockwise. The precision of their patterns and movements, especially their rushing feet, is mind – boggling.

*\*Apochryphal Anecdote\**

Several years in a row, I noticed the same woman in the Kelaa at the Marrakesh Folk Festival and, realizing that only unmarried women can dance in the Kelaa, I assumed she was a spinster, divorcee or widow. I later learned that she was the wife of the rais of the best Kelaa M'Gouna group and its lynchpin dancer. He temporarily divorced her each year before the Folk Festival, so she could participate, bringing honor to him and their village with her skill.

## **V. Houara, Mother of Flamenco**

South of Agadir, less than ten km. inland from the Atlantic coast of Morocco, lies Inezgane, home of the Houara tribe, branches of which are also found in Ouled Teima, approximately 30 km to the east and slightly north, midway between Inezgane and Taroudant. Although in the heart of the Berber Souss, the Ait Houara speak and sing in Arabic.

The men are all in white thobes and hooded djellabas, with babouches on their feet. Sometimes the djellabas have black vertical stripes. The women are in belted kaftans and d'finas. Fringed scarves, tied in the back, hide most of their hair. The main instrument for the Houara, aside from coordinated staccato clapping (as in Flamenco), is a metal tire center, played with two long metal nails or sticks: da-da dum da-da, da-da dum da-da. The group is almost entirely composed of men, with one or two women: the best dancers and most daring souls of their sex from within the Houara.

This dance isn't a religious communion with the spirits and sharing of the soul – like Guedra, nor a group courtship “look each other over” dance – like the Ahouache of Imin Tanout or the Kelaa of the Ait M'Gouna (or all Ahidous), nor an actual ancient wedding rite – like the betrothal dance of Tissint. This is a show – off demonstration of superior skill for one's friends and peers, pure and simple.

They start by singing in loud voices, short bursts of song followed by crescendos of rapid footwork as a group. Two or three rounds in this manner, then the next bursts of song end with one or two of the men running forward, beating feet like crazy for a few seconds, then rushing back to the line. As it goes on, the men end their “solos” with high leaps or sharp flamenco-like barrel turns, sometimes both. After several rounds of these macho outbursts/ challenges, when the rhythm and excitement reach their peak, one of the women rushes forward. Her footwork is even more skilled and complex than the men's, her solo longer.

Flinging the front halves of her d'fina, she makes several *vueltas quebradas* and jumps into the air, bending her knees, tucking her calves to her thighs. Sometimes, her hips move with the footwork, sometimes she uses them to manipulate a dagger under her d'fina, moving as if she's on horseback, her feet the horse's hooves. After a while, one of the men, unable to resist, rushes forward and, facing each other, they begin to dance together. He blends his footwork with hers, they spin and leap in unison, his arms, elbows bent, in front and behind him as he spins,

she, flinging her d'fina furiously as she spins. They resemble the courtship fight of a rooster and hen – or Kate and Petrucchio (Taylor and Burton?) in “Taming of the Shrew”. Occasionally, two women from the circle challenge each other.

Like flamenco? Meet its mother. The Moors – that is, the Moroccans – ruled Andalusia for several hundred years. Approximately ten per cent of the Spanish language has Arabic roots, e.g.: el algodón, el alfombra, el almoada, el aceituna, el Alhambra, el Albaicin, el Cid, ojala, OLE (just try shouting “Allah” under Ferdinand and Isabella, their “most Catholic majesties”, who threw the Moors and Jews out of Spain, and see how fast you’d be turned into a crispy critter by the Inquisition...). The very word “Flamenco” comes from Arabic, though Spanish chauvinists try to translate it as “flamingo” or, worse yet, “Flemish”. The root is the Arabic word “fellaḥ”: peasant, farmer, poor person.

(Re what eurocentrics would like to think is “Spanish” architecture: Meknes’ architectural style existed well before Moors got to Spain and turned it into a center of architecture, art, music and poetry.)

## **VI: Schikhatt: from Sex Education to Social Recreation**

In Classical Arabic, the word *sheikha* is the feminine of *sheikh*: a person with knowledge, experience, wisdom. In Maghrebi (Moroccan Arabic), “sheikha” limits its meaning to specify a woman with carnal knowledge extensive enough to teach others.

Under prevailing interpretations of Islam and Sharia, both the bride and groom, but certainly and especially the bride, are expected to be virgins before their wedding. In many areas, to avoid any possibility of dishonoring a family via an illegitimate pregnancy, girls are married off even before puberty.

Before the marriage ceremony, at which, as custom demands, the young bride is conspicuous by her absence (she is represented by a male relative), there are many sex – segregated festivities and ceremonies. For at least three days, sometimes a week or more with wealthy city families, preceding the signing of the marriage contract and ritual carrying of the bride to the house of the groom’s family, day – long women’s parties are hosted in the home of the bride’s family to display her dowry, clothing and beauty.

She sits motionless on a “throne” set apart, eating nothing all day, leaving only to change her elaborate clothes at least three times a day, while the massed female relatives loudly discuss her flaws and attributes in front of her. Several times a day, she will be lifted in her chair by two or three women and carried around the room, to better show off the details of her finery.

Fortunately, the family has hired a sheikha and her all – female group of schikhatt musicians and dancers to liven things up. The sheikha, who usually knows all the local gossip and, therefore, everything about everybody at the party, begins by singing impromptu raucous verses poking fun at the foibles and defects of family and guests alike. Between the verses, her troupe vigorously dances the Schikhatt, exaggeratedly moving hips, stomach and breasts, for this is very definitely an erotic dance and the movements have to be visible in spite of the large, loose kaftans and d’finas they wear.

The Schikhatt has nothing to do with Raks Sharki, despite the fact both consist mainly of control and articulation of torso muscles – versus limbs, as in Western dance. Lately, however, due to recent exposure to Lebanese and Egyptian movies and videotapes, Raks Sharki movement is showing up in the Schikhatts of sophisticated city – dwellers, in an effort to elevate it, make it more artistic.

Musical accompaniment can be as simple as bendirs, clapping and voices singing the refrain to the sheikha’s ribald improvised verses, or with a guimbry (stringed instrument, held horizontally, plucked and played like a banjo) or kemanjeh (violin, held vertically on the knee and bowed) added. More skilled Schikhatt dancers play sagat (finger cymbals), but only three – not four: two on the right hand, one on the left; some hold a small *taarija* (drum) in one hand, hitting the other hand with it as they dance; some play bendirs while executing the movements.

When she feels the time is proper and her “stage” has been set, the sheikha, herself, dances in front of the bride to be, singing verses about the pleasures of marital relations that await the bride after the ordeal of the wedding night and the loss of her virginity. With the Schikhatt movements, she demonstrates how the bride will be expected to move in the marriage bed. (It’s interesting to note that, in a culture where a woman’s public role is so circumscribed and her behavior so restricted vis -a- vis men, references to and discussion of matters sexual and physical are so much more frank, open and specific by women with and among other women and within the circle of the family.)

Both before and moreso after the sheikha’s dance for the bride, all the women get up at one time or another to dance with the troupe and each other, until they are tired and ready to go home for the day. Depending on her finances and

personal scruples, the sheikha will either go home or to the men's party, to entertain them with much bawdier songs and behavior.

It's not socially acceptable for a "good" woman to be a professional Schikhatt dancer, but everyone dances the Schikhatt – at home and at parties. It's OK for a man to take a Schikhatt dancer as his second, or better yet, third wife, but she is forbidden to perform in public as long as the marriage lasts. Men do Schikhatt too, but if they are professionals – and there are many – they dress in drag or, at the very least, wear a woman's kaftan and d'fina, to acknowledge that it's a woman's dance.

Family men come home from work for their main meal at midday, nap, then return to work until evening. The household women's whole morning is taken in its preparation. Leftovers, bread and cheese suffice for dinner, so after the men go back to work, the afternoon is for a bit of diversion with one's fellow females. Typical, respectable Moroccan city women have no access to exercise centers, spas, dance classes, movie matinees. They must make their own amusements at home, within the family enclosure or visiting the other women in their homes. They don't "lunch". What they do do is dance the Schikhatt with and for each other, making up verses or repeating those they've heard and liked. They egg each other on and do their own steps and variations solo or duo. They add movements seen on television and at other women's parties. City Schikhatts are far more "laid back" and varied than the schleuh (village) variety, which tend to be more direct and energetic.

### **Comments in Conclusion:**

There are about two hundred different Berber tribes in Morocco, each with its distinctive dress – especially the women's, language, dance and social customs. For each and every one of them, dance is an integral and constant affirmation of who and what they are: a form of self and group expression and pleasure: they dance throughout their entire lives.

Some tribes pray and send blessings by dance; others celebrate plantings, harvests, holidays, seasonal changes and births with dance; so many meet and court during dance; challenge one another, show off and communicate in dance; several seal marriages with a dance; most city and many country women get their sex education via dance; most tribes have their macho, warrior dances for the men.

All these dances are *assimilated* – versus studied – in the normal course of family and tribal life and not in special schools or courses. It's not for a theater show or to play a part. It is their pride, a statement of their specific ethnicity: for each village, tribe, age, sex, class has its own special dance with which it identifies and declares itself.

**Footnotes:** Over 37 years of frequent in person observation & conversation – and –

1. National Geographic:
    - Ref.- household keys: Aug., 1973 – Pp. 222-3
    - Blue Men's veils: *ibid* – Pp. 220, 228; Apr., 1974 – Pp. 552-4 & May, 1958 – Pp. 689 & 691
    - Matriarchy: May, 1958 – pg. 689
  2. Natural History Magazine, Volume 101 Number 11, November, 1992 "Where All the Women Are Strong" Pp. 54-63
  3. "Faces In the Smoke" by Douchan Gersi:
    - Why Blue men blue: pg. 69
    - Sexual freedom: pg. 76
    - Men's veiling: pg. 36
  4. Bendir: circular, wooden frame tambour with sheep or goatskin head – two strings along the inside add a vibratory sound
  5. Babouches: backless Moroccan slippers
  6. Sharia: Islamic law & social codes, drawn from the Koran & Hadith
-





the veiled  
mystery of

Morocco

Photographed by  
Irving Penn

Morocco is a jewel country. It startles, aggrasses, ignites, seduces with its beauty. But Morocco is Islam, wrapped, walled, impenetrable, a world of mystery and magic, of Arab and Berber, contrasting peoples living in a turbulent kingdom by the sea. Part of the Maghreb—that swag of North Africa comprising Libya, Tunisia, and Algeria—Morocco, spined by cloud-scraping peaks of the Atlas ranges, stretches from the saffron sands of the Sahara to the Mediterranean Barbary Coast. (Barbary stems from Berber, the fierce and noble tribe indigenous to this land.) For these pages, Irving Penn has photographed nomadic Blue People of the Sahara, desert Arabs of the Ksour, proud and independent Ait Yezza Berbers of the soaring plateaus of the High Atlas, and jeweled dancers in the Kasbah.

Especially for Vogue, the internationally recognized authority Dr. Ahmed Sefrioui, who is the director of visual arts for the museums of Morocco, wrote about the ancient unchanging costumes and make-up of his country—and of their curious, still (Continued on page 171)

**M**oroccan women strip off their mysterious veils when they begin to dance. These *ahwach* dancers, brocaded, spangled, perform to the beat of gigantic tambourines in the cinnamon-red, bonfire-lit Kasbah of Taourirt, a fortified town in the Northeast.

PS and be sure to also checkout the Moroccan born artist: Lalla Essayd (b. 1956) :

<http://lallaessaydi.com/1.html>

